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Letter From a Dead Man

On a trip to Saigon in 1964, NEWSWEEK's Pentagon correspondent Lloyd H. Norman met South Vietnamese Col. Pham Ngoc Thao. Last fall, Thao, regarded as a troublesome coup-maker at home, was in effect exiled to the U.S. as the press attaché in Saigon's Washington embassy, thus giving Norman a chance to renew his acquaintance with Thao, his wife and their six children. Shortly after Christmas, Thao left his family behind in Washington and surfaced briefly in Saigon in February as one of the leaders of an abortive coup against Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh. By then a much-wanted fugitive, Thao disappeared. Last week, he was finally run down by security forces and killed. Only the day before, Norman had received a letter from Thao in the Saigon area dated June 4 in which the passionately patriotic Catholic presented his views on why the war against the Viet Cong is not being won. Some excerpts:

Dear Mr. Norman:

You could, from afar, think that I am a born conspirator—this is an error. I think hard before acting. If Nguyen Khanh had been truly useful in Vietnam, I would have supported him completely. But he was bad for the country, and I

worked to overthrow him. The Americans initially fought me tooth and nail, but afterward realized that I was right. Washington dreams often, with eyes open, because it bases its actions on reports which though they may be sincere are incorrect. The Vietnamese problem has been poorly understood for the last twenty years, since 1945. If one does not begin with the facts of 1965, a good solution will not be found, and the Americans will continue to be always on the wrong side.

A certain form of humanitarian socialism is essential. If you fear this word socialism, call it what you will. Essentially it is a profound social reform, beginning with agrarian reform.

Politically one must recognize that the resistance against the French colonialists was a nationalistic war. Therefore, one must draw the resistant elements into the Nationalist government . . . One ought not fear the socialistic or leftist tendency of these new men. They have the confidence of the people. If the U.S. supports them sincerely, they will reject the Communist camp . . . It is also essential that the Americans support a socialist or almost socialist program.

The more airplanes and bombs you send, the quicker you will lose the confidence of South Vietnam and of Southeast Asia. In truth Mr. McNamara is a very bad adviser for President Johnson . . . He has understood nothing of the problem of Vietnam. I regret to say this, but I believe it strongly.

Do not believe that I work alone in Vietnam. Our group is very strong. If it does not triumph now, it will triumph later. It would be better to lose half of South Vietnam and begin again . . . than to continue with a government of military chiefs who are completely discredited in the eyes of the people.

The strategy of men like Diem, Khanh and Quat is always the same: identify the opposition with the Communists. The danger is that the Americans are falling into the trap too, at least for a certain period of time. We are not Communists. We are nationalists, but also socialists . . . I am confident that in the end we will triumph and with the aid of the Americans, including the CIA.

My family is poor. Could you please help my wife find a job so she can support the children? Thank you in advance.
Col. Pham Ngoc Thao

MORI/CDE